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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with research on the effects of the promotion of reading by means of the mass medium television and refers to a study done on behalf of the Reading Association (Stichting Lezen) and the Foundation for the Collective Propaganda of Dutch Books (Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse boek), two Dutch literary institutions. The study concerns an evaluation of the effects of the program "I've Already Got a Book," which was broadcast once a week on Dutch television in 1995 and included interviews with authors and reviews of a wide range of newly published books. The purpose of the series was to promote reading. There is much confusion about the Dutch term for reading promotion ("leesbevordering"), because every institution in the field gives a different interpretation of the term. Attention is paid to the various definitions that can be distinguished and the argument is focused on "I've Already Got a Book." The study evaluated whether the books that were dealt with in the series were actually bought or borrowed on account of the series, and if so, by whom. A survey was therefore carried out in 13 large Dutch bookshops and borrowing figures were collected in libraries. A summary of the results of this study is given and some conclusions are provided concerning the promotion of reading by means of the television series. (Contains 14 references, 3 notes, and 2 tables of data.) (RS)

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THE PROMOTION OF READING BY TELEVISION

A study of the effects of the tv-series *I've already got a book*

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Abstract

This paper deals with research on the effects of the promotion of reading by means of the mass medium television. We will refer to a study we did on behalf of the Reading Association (Stichting Lezen) and the Foundation for the Collective Propaganda of Dutch Books (Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse boek), two Dutch literary institutions. The study concerns an evaluation of the effects of the program 'I've already got a book', which was broadcast once a week on Dutch television in 1995, and included interviews with authors and reviews of a wide range of newly published books. The purpose of the series was to promote reading.

There is much confusion about the Dutch term for reading promotion ("leesbevordering"), because every institution in the field gives a different interpretation of the term. We will pay attention to the various definitions that can be distinguished and then focus our argument on 'I've already got a book'.

The goal of the study was to evaluate the influence of the series, the objective of which was to increase the number of books sold and borrowed, on the purchasing behaviour of consumers in bookshops and the borrowing behaviour of members of libraries.

The study evaluated whether the books that were dealt with in the series were actually bought or borrowed on account of the series, and if so, by whom. A survey was therefore carried out in thirteen large Dutch bookshops, and borrowing figures were collected in libraries.

We will give a summary of the results of this study and finish our argument with some conclusions concerning the promotion of reading by means of the tv-series 'I've already got a book'.

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Introduction

Since 1980 many different tv-series about books have appeared on Dutch television. The best known of these is a series called *Here is Adriaan van Dis*, which was broadcast in the eighties and the beginning of the nineties. This program, which especially paid attention to literary books, had a tremendous impact on the numbers of sold books of the authors who were interviewed (see also Goedegebuure, 1993).

The publicity around the program of Van Dis reached the Dutch Ministry of Culture and the institutions in the field of reading promotion: they discovered that tv was not by definition an **enemy** of reading, but that, on the contrary, it could even be an important **instrument** to promote reading.

For that reason the Dutch Government and the literary institutions have financed several tv-series about books. One of the first ones was the program that this paper is about, *I've already got a book*. From the end of 1994 until early 1996 the series, which was transmitted once a week in the early evening hours, appeared on Dutch television. It included interviews with authors and reviews of a wide range of newly published books. *I've already got a book* aimed at a wide audience. The effects of *I've already got a book* were evaluated on behalf of the Reading Association and the Foundation for the Collective Propaganda of Dutch Books, which both financially supported the tv-series.[1] This evaluation enabled the authors to examine the effectiveness of reading promotion by the mass medium television.

The series was a sequel to a series with the same name that was broadcast in 1991. The effects of that series had been evaluated as well (in De Vries and Ohlsen, 1991). In 1992, due to the results of that study, the EC called *I've already got a book* 'the most ideal tv-series to promote reading'. This contributed to the decision to produce a new series.

Reading promotion

The Dutch term for reading promotion (*leesbevordering*) has been in use since the eighties. Several studies that were published at the time showed that the Dutch population spent less and less time on reading, especially young people and people with little education (Knulst and Kalmijn, 1988). Apart from this, there was a sharp decline in the numbers of books sold in these years and an increase in functional illiteracy.

Since the eighties, an increasing number of initiatives have been developed by the government, the book publishing industry, libraries and educational institutions to stimulate the reading, borrowing and buying of books in the Netherlands. New institutions were set up that specialized in reading promotion. One of these was the Reading Association, which in 1993 became the national platform for reading promotion.

There is much confusion about the definition of the Dutch word for reading promotion ("*leesbevordering*"). Every institution in the field has it own interests and objectives with regard to reading promotion, and applies the term accordingly (for overviews see Verschuren, 1993 and Piek, 1995). The most common definitions are summarized in the text-frame below.

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[1] The study was published in De Vries and Ohlsen (1995).

Reading promotion can mean:
To influence in a positive way:
I Reading **competence**:
* reading competence in general
* literary reading competence
II The **attitude** towards reading:
* attitude towards reading in gerneral
* attittude towards the reading of literature
III Reading, borrowing and purchasing **behaviour**:
* A. reading in general
* B. reading of literature
* C. buying and/or borrowing of books, papers and magazines in general
* D. buying and/or borrowing of literature.

There also has been a lot of crititism against the institutions that try to promote reading (Verschuren, 1993). Some people object to their pessimistic attitude. Although in general people spend less time on reading than they used to do, there are nevertheless a lot of facts that should lead to a more optimistic view. Since 1990 there has been a remarkable growth of the number of sold books. Literary books are more popular than ever before: 22% of all sold books are literary books. The number of members of libraries has shown an enormous increase since 1970. The number of borrowings in libraries has increased accordingly. Also, there is hardly a decrease in the number of youth-members of the libraries. **Tables I and II** give an overview of these figures.

Table I. Figures of libraries in The Netherlands, 1970 - 1995

	Borowings of books*	Index of borrowings**	Members of libraries*	Youth members*	Adult Members*
1970	58,7	52	1,4	-	-
1975	110,7	100	2,9	1,6	1,3
1980	157,9	143	4,0	2,3	1,7
1985	164,3	148	4,1	2,2	1,9
1990	173,0	156	4,3	2,1	2,2
1995	166,0	150	4,6	2,2	2,4

* In miljons
** Index: 1975=100
\- No data available.
Sources: Gasenbeek, 1987, Stichting Speurwerk/NBLC, 1993, 1994 and 1995, Stichting Speurwerk, 1998.

Another objection against the activitities in the field of reading promotion is that there is not much proof that these activities have positive effects. There is a lack of well-organized effect studies, although this has improved in the last few years (see also Van Lierop-Debrauwer, 1993).

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Reading promotion and *I've already got a book*

In order to evaluate the effects of a reading promotion project like *I've already got a book* it was necessary to clearly define its objectives and its intended effects. The objective of *I've already got a book* was to increase the number of sold and borrowed books in general. It can therefore be categorized in the text-frame above at III C.

The effect to be evaluated by means of the study can be defined as the influence of the series on the purchasing behavior of consumers in bookshops and on the borrowing behavior of members of libraries. The study evaluated whether the books that were dealt with in the series were actually bought or borrowed on account of the series and if this was the case, by whom.

National viewership figures indicated that the series did not have many viewers: an average 4% of all Dutch people who watched television at the hour the series was broadcast actually watched the series.[2] Among them was a relatively large group of women and older people.[3]

Table II. Figures of book sales in The Netherlands 1970- 1997

	General books*	Index general books**	Literature*	Index literature**	Perc. lit. on total
1970	44,6	134	- ***	- ***	- ***
1975	33,4	100	3,0	100	9%
1980	33,0	99	4,6	153	14%
1985	30,3	91	5,2	173	17%
1990	26,8	80	6,1	203	23%
1995	34,4	103	8,6	287	25%
1997	40,2	120	8,9	296	22%

* In miljons of copies

** Index:1975=100

*** No data available

Sources: Gasenbeek, 1987, Stichting Speurwerk/NBLC, 1993, 1994 and 1995, Stichting Speurwerk, 1998.

Framework

For the evaluation of the effects of *I've already got a book* on the buying of books, a survey was set up in thirteen large Dutch bookshops, spread over the country, among people who had bought a book that had been dealt with in the series. Next to this, purchasers of other books were interviewed, and data were collected on the reading, purchasing and borrowing behavior of the Dutch population in general. To find out what possible effects the series could have in libraries, borrowing figures were collected of books written by authors who had featured in *I've already got a book*. Every author was paired with another one, in order to form a 'control group'. The latter group consisted of authors who had **not** featured in the series. Next, borrowing figures of a defined period of fifteen weeks were collected from all the authors, by author and by week. In each case the seventh week was the week of the program

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[2] In absolute numbers the series drew an average 175,500 viewers every time it was broadcast. Because of this relatively small number of viewers, the broadcasting organization decided to end the series after thirty-one weeks. The first series of 1991, broadcast by the same organization, only existed for five weeks. Then as well, low viewership figures were the cause of the untimely end of the series. Since 1995, several other tv programs about books have appeared on Dutch television, but most of them do not even survive one tv-season, mainly because of low viewership figures.

[3] The series was broadcast in the early evening hours, a time of day in which the tv-audience consists of relatively many older people.

with the interview. Borrowing figures of the same period of fifteen weeks were collected from the authors in the control group. The comparison of these figures made it possible to find out whether fluctuations in the numbers of borrowings were coincidental or a result of the appearance of the authors in *I've already got a book*.

Results

The survey showed that one out of every ten respondents who bought a book that was featured in *I've already got a book*, knew the book from the series. It turned out that the educational level of these respondents was much higher than that of the average Dutchman, but lower than that of the other bookpurchasers. The buyers who saw the series and were influenced by it appeared to buy and borrow books very regularly, even more often than the other purchasers turned out to do.

If these results are compared with the study of 1991, the composition of the group of influenced purchasers appears to have become more homogeneous: in fewer cases than in 1991, people that normally do not visit bookshops were influenced by the series.

The borrowing figures of the libraries showed fluctuations or 'peaks' in the borrowings that were too large to be coincidental. The figures of the control group did not show these peaks. One of the peaks (in week number 8, the week following the programs with the interviews) actually proved to be a result of *I've already got a book*. This peak however, was mainly caused by an increase in the borrowings of the books of only one author, who also happens to be the most borrowed writer in the Netherlands: Mrs. Thijssing-Boer, author of a large number of regional novels. Moreover, the effect was of short duration: the increase in the borrowing figures was only significant in the week directly following the program with the interview. The profile of the average viewer of the series (older women) that emerges from the viewership figures, could very well correspond with the profile of the (potential) reader of the books of Thijssing-Boer. From this assumption, the effect of the series on the borrowings of **her** books, can be explained.

Conclusions

The results of the study showed that *I've already got a book* affected the buying, as well as the borrowing of books. In bookshops those higher educated people were influenced in their purchasing behavior that already belonged to the group of regular bookpurchasers and -borrowers. In the libraries the effect of the series expressed itself in a shortlived increase in the borrowing figures of one author. This concerned a popular writer, whose books are borrowed very often already, even without an appearance in a tv-program.

From the above it can be concluded that tv-series about books can indeed contribute to reading promotion. In the case of *I've already got a book*, however, the effect was very small. Moreover, the target groups to which reading promotion projects are usually addressed, was not reached: people that hardly read, buy or borrow books. Probably this was due to the formula used for the series (information for a wide audience about a wide range of books), and to the hour of transmission. A tv-series about books with a more clearly defined target group, to which the formula and the hour of transmission are attuned, is likely to be more effective.

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